

Why are you replacing that perfectly good bridge?

Your County Engineer is asked that question many times. And “Can’t you use that money somewhere else?” If only the answer were that simple! In some cases I would like to do just that.

The two most common reasons are that the outward appearance of the bridge may not show its ability to carry modern traffic. Then, the source of the funds used for bridge replacement determines how and where those dollars can be used.

Let’s start with some background on how counties most often get money to replace bridges. Part of the federal money that Washington State gets must be used to replace or fix bridges. The bridges in the worst shape get top priority, no matter where they are. Several factors are used to decide if a bridge is eligible for the funds, and then its priority. And priority is decided state wide.

The bridge has to be 20 feet in length or longer. Is the bridge posted for weight restrictions? Is it too narrow? What is its structural condition, that is, will it carry trucks safely? Is the stream it crosses doing damage to it? How much traffic does it carry? And, what are the impacts if it were closed?

Federal dollars require “match”. That is, the local agency has to come up with some of their own dollars. Most local agencies get this match money from competitive state funded programs. Those dollars come from gas taxes. Some counties also use their own road funds that come from the property tax for local match. They also use those money sources to do projects on bridges under 20 feet in length, or for those projects that are too low on the federal priority scale.

Compared to rural road projects, bridge projects are a lot more expensive. 100% locally funded bridge projects are rare.

So, back to the question “why are you doing this project instead of that one?”

The simple answer is that this bridge project met the current criteria for funding and that project doesn’t, yet! Bridges have a limited life, around 40-60 years. Eventually they need to be replaced or rehabilitated. As a practical matter, few County Engineers will pass up the chance to improve our Transportation system, even though the project may not be high on our priority list. By replacing or improving that bridge, the County Engineer can redirect limited maintenance dollar to the other bridges that now need it more.

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Questions about this article, or any of the series, or on other topics related to County Roads, may be directed either to your County Engineer, or to Al King, P.E., County Road Administration Board, Olympia, at Al@CRAB.Wa.Gov.